

Five Years After Tahrir Square, Egypt's Police State Worse Than Ever

Intent on suppressing any protests marking Arab Spring anniversary, al-Sisi government oversaw widespread raids and disappearances

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Image: Egyptian flags fly over Cairo's Tahrir Square during the 2011 uprising. (Photo: [Ramy Raouf/cc/flickr](#))

Five years after mass popular uprisings ousted longtime dictator Hosni Mubarek, Egyptians are again under siege. In an attempt to thwart demonstrations honoring the 2011 [Arab Spring](#), the government of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has deployed troops, raided homes and cultural centers, and reportedly disappeared hundreds of activists in the lead-up to the anniversary on Monday, intensifying a [widespread](#) crackdown on [dissent](#).

Over the past two weeks, security forces interrogated residents and searched more than 5,000 homes in central Cairo as a "precautionary measure" against demonstrations, which officials [claim](#) "are aimed at polarizing society and mobilizing the masses against the government."

Meanwhile, activists [estimate](#) that between August and November more than 340 people "disappeared" into government custody. Sherif Mohie Eddin of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights said the total number recently imprisoned is "not less than 1,000," adding to the tens of thousands of journalists, religious and protest leaders, and other political detainees already held in Egyptian prisons.

Despite the climate of fear, some protesters braved the streets on Monday to honor the legacy of January 25 and call attention to the ongoing violence and suppression.

Al Jazeera [reports](#):

Egyptians demonstrated against the military-led government in Alexandria's Al-Qaed Ibrahim Square, which was the site of 2011 protests, as well as in Nasr City and Shubra district in the capital, Cairo.

Two Egyptians were shot dead by police in an alleged "exchange of gunfire" in Cairo's October 6 district. Security forces also used gas bombs to disperse protesters in Cairo's eastern al-Matareya district as well as in Kafr Sheikh.

Residents reported that the build-up of security forces, along with recent crackdowns on activists and arbitrary raids on homes, reflected the government's resolve to prevent marking the anniversary with popular

demonstrations similar to those in 2011.

As the *New York Times*' Kareem Fahim [notes](#), “the scale of the clampdown has baffled many people here, as has the level of official alarm, from a government that has faced no challenge from large-scale protests in years. In word and deed, Mr. Sisi and other officials have treated even the possibility of demonstrations on the anniversary as a grave threat to the nation.”

Activists say that state repression today is even worse than under Mubarak.

“This is without doubt the worst we’ve ever seen,” Hossam Bahgat, an investigative reporter who was [recently detained](#) by Egypt’s military intelligence agency, [told](#) the *Guardian* ahead of the anniversary.

“The level of repression now is significantly higher than it was under the Mubarak regime, and people from older generations say it is worse than even the worst periods of the 1950s and 1960s [under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser].”

“Five years after euphoric crowds celebrated the fall of President Hosni Mubarak, the hopes that the ‘25 January Revolution’ would herald a new era of reforms and respect for human rights have been truly shattered. Egyptians have been made to watch as their country reverts back to a police state,”

[said](#) Said Boumedouha, Amnesty International’s deputy Middle East and North Africa programme director.

“Peaceful protesters, politicians and journalists have borne the brunt of a ruthless campaign against legitimate dissent by the government and state security forces,” Boumedouha continued. “Tens of thousands have been arrested and the country’s prisons are now overflowing, with widespread reports of torture and hundreds held without charge or trial.”

Without a trace of irony, in a televised speech on Sunday, al-Sisi [praised](#) the “noble principles” of those whose lives were lost during the Tahrir Square uprisings, adding:

“Egypt today is not the Egypt of yesterday. We are building together a modern, developed and civilian state that upholds the values of democracy and freedom. Democratic experiences don’t mature overnight, but rather through a continuing and accumulative process.”

The five year anniversary comes amid intensifying war in the [Middle East](#), which has enabled the United States and [other](#) western governments to continue to [support](#) Egypt as a key ally—with aid, arms, and military “cooperation”—despite the widespread and documented human rights abuses.

For many who helped bring the revolution about, the anniversary marks a moment of reflection.

Abdel Rahman Mansour, one of the activists who helped spur the 2011 uprising, [argued](#) Monday that Egyptians are engaging in a “silent protest” against the

current regime.

“I think the collective psyche of the Egyptian people is waiting for a moment, an opportunity, because you cannot achieve success twice with the same tools, and I think this is a good sign,” Mansour said.

He continued:

The low turnout in the last parliamentary elections is a reflection of people’s understanding of what type of regime they are living under. The low turnout was a silent protest on the part of the Egyptian people against the regime. When they see that the moment is ripe to defeat the police again, they will take to the streets to do so. January 25 came about because people believed in their ability to achieve victory. This moment is yet to come, and waiting for it is not a mistake. The onus is on the ordinary people who can make meaningful change.

Tahrir Square protester Omar Robert Hamilton in a column Monday [suggests](#) that the memory of the revolution will hopefully sustain another someday.

“What else do we have left to fight with? That memory of possibility is all we have,” he states. “Maybe, for now, it is enough. We know that it still scares them: the idea of revolution. January 25th will always carry a symbolic and emotional potency, and the state has shown its nervousness.”

“The question is what might come next,” Hamilton continues.

“The possibilities line up before us: decades of President [Abdel Fatah al-Sisi](#) overseeing a country slowly crumbling into the sea. A series of intra-military coups. More uprisings of the hungry and dispossessed. A slow democratisation process played out between competing elites. State collapse and an Islamic State insurgency. An acceleration in climate change, the flooding of the Nile Delta and widespread famine.

“Or, something different, something none of us can see yet,” he concludes. “I can’t say that I’m optimistic. But I’m not dead and I’m not in prison so I have no right to say it’s all over.”

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